19: Marshall M-5 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
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CHAPTER III

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Karen are of medium height. On the plains they average about five feet, four inches, in stature, and in the hills they are about three inches shorter. The women are smaller than the men.[1] The hill people have the harder struggle for a livelihood and are also more liable to attacks of malaria. The Brecs show evident signs of stunted growth. On the plains and in the more fertile lower hills we find that the Karen are a stocky race with broad, well-built bodies, strong legs, and well-rounded calves. The legs are often short in proportion to the body. Karen players on a football team are usually noticeable for their sturdy appearance, in contrast with the slimmer Burman boys. They are capable of considerable physical exertion, but soon tire. The women are well formed and buxom. They have an erect carriage, being used to bearing heavy burdens on their heads or backs. Their teeth, like the men's, are stained with continual betel chewing. In the hills their lack of bathing and their accumulations of beads and charms detract from their appearance; but when they have taken on more cleanly ways they become not unattractive. Their youth is cut short by heavy work in the field, constant childbearing, and nursing, and soon the signs of age appear.

The color of the Karen varies all the way from a light olive complexion to a dark coffee brown. On the whole, their color could be said to range between that of the Burmans and the Chinese. Those who work indoors are, of course, lighter than those who work in the open. Many skins have a distinctly yellowish or red-

[1] I took a few measurements with the tape line, and found that about seventy men on the plains gave the above average. The tallest was five feet, nine inches, and the shortest was four feet, eleven inches. In the hills my measurments were confined to one village. Here the headman was the tallest, measuring five feet, six inches. The shortest man in the village was four feet and eleven inches in height. Of about twenty women measured the tallest was five feet, five inches, and the shortest, four feet, nine inches. Three were each four feet, ten inches. The average among the women was a very small fraction over five feet. Dr. Mason gives the shortest man, a Bghai chief, as being only four feet, eight inches high, while the shortest woman he measured was four feet, five inches tall. (*Jour., Asiatic Soc. of Bengal*, Vol. XXXV, p. 7.) MacMahon notes that in the Red Karen country the women are usually as tall as, if not taller than, the men. (*The Karens of the Golden Chersonese*, p. 34.)

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PROFILE VIEW

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KAREN FAMILY WITH TRACES OF HINDOO BLOOD—FRONT VIEW

The rest of the villagers, to whom this family is related by the usual web of intermarriages, acknowledge the difference of features, but are at a loss to account for it.

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dish tinge. Infants are often almost as white as European children. Red cheeks are not infrequently found in the Toungoo hills.[2]

Though we often find considerable individuality in the facial features of the Karen, they conform more or less to type, which consists of the broad flat face of the Mongolian races with high cheek-bones and widely set eyes. The eyes have narrow palpebral openings, sometimes slanted, and the characteristic fold at the nasal end. The nose is broad and flat without much of a bridge. The plane of the nostrils is tilted upward, so that the septum and nostrils are quite noticeable. The mouth is usually well shaped, but a few individuals have thick lips and a heavy negroid mouth. The teeth are quite regular and, when not stained with betel, are white and shining.

In the Pegu Hills, in the village of Ngepe, I found a family that had decidedly negroid features. (See cuts on p. 17.) The contrast with the rest of the villagers was marked. Although I could get no hint of a different ancestry in the case of the exceptional family from that of the rest of the people, it was obvious that an admixture of Negrito blood must have taken place somewhere.

The hair of the Karen is generally black, straight, and coarse. Once in a while wavy hair is found, and in rare cases it seems to be almost as kinky as that of the African. Wavy hair is not admired, but, on the contrary, is much disliked. The Karen have an abundance of hair on the scalp. It often reaches to the waist, and I have noticed a few instances in which it reached to the ground. In the early days the custom was for both sexes to wear the hair long, but now the men usually wear theirs short.

The men have scant beards which are seldom allowed to grow, being pulled out with tweezers. The mustache is prized and is coaxed to become as luxuriant as possible. In the few cases where the beard is allowed to grow, it resembles the beards of Chinese men. However, I know a Karen teacher in Bassein who has a beard that would please any inhabitant of Russia. A mole with a few hairs growing from it is greatly treasured, the hairs being allowed to grow as long as they will. Hair on the body and chest of the

[2] According to Broca's plates for classifying the color of the skin I found, in examining about ninety persons, that twenty-five matched No. 30 of his series; nineteen, No. 25; fifteen, No. 14; eight, No. 26; five each, Nos. 29 and 45; three each, Nos. 24 and 31; two, No. 21, and one each, Nos. 37, 40, 47, and 53. The lightest color found was No. 24. One of the fair ones was an infant, and the other two were men, namely, a clerk and a hill boy. The darkest complexion corresponded to No. 37, of which I found but one. No. 29, which was the color of five of the subjects examined, is a much redder hue than No. 37. All determinations of color were made on unexposed parts of the body where the skin had not been tanned by sunlight.

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1922 AP1 Burma
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men is rare. I can recall only one man who had a hairy chest. There is nothing unusual about the eyebrows.

The Karen seem to be susceptible to all the diseases prevalent in the country. Children are seen more often than not with distended bowels, due to worms. Enlarged spleen is the rule in the hills, where malaria is so prevalent. A number of cases in which a low vitality has caused ulcers to break out and involve the entire system have come under my notice. Epidemics of measles are much feared, due to complications induced by bathing soon after the rash has disappeared, the bathing being thought necessary. Smallpox does not cause much apprehension. The bubonic plague has never claimed many Karen victims, but the influenza was terribly fatal during the cool season of 1918-19. Tuberculosis is one of the many diseases from the West that is claiming its victims among the Karen people. Though their open-air life safeguards them somewhat, their fear of demons causes them to cover their heads at night, and they breathe only through their blankets. Those who live in the better built houses on the plains also deprive themselves of fresh air by retiring into the close inner room of their homes in order to avoid the smell of cooking, which they fear. Such superstitious practices furnish ideal breeding-places for germs. The unbalanced diet of the Karen also restricts their disease-resisting powers. One hopes that, with improved ideas on sanitation and hygiene, the people of this race will not only be relieved from the present high rate of infant mortality, but also that those surviving may attain greater longevity.

The presence of certain birth-marks on the children of Mongolian parents has been thought by some scientists to be an important criterion for distinguishing members of that race.[1] The Karen infants certainly have these blue patches on the back and buttocks. Sometimes they are so indistinct as to be hardly noticeable, and again they are clear and bright. They are irregular in shape and size. My observations confirm the accuracy of the census returns, namely, that about seven out of ten children have these marks at birth. They usually disappear by the time a child is a year old. The Karen explanation for them is that they are the stains of leaves, on which the spirits of the children sat or laid down to rest in the course of their long and wearisome journey from their former abode. These marks are thought to show that the children having

[1] The *Indian Imperial Census*, 1911, Burma, Pt. I, 231-236.

Sgaw Karen Young Bloods, Ngape En Village, Thabbawaddy Hills (Front and Si
Like most mountain people, the Karen are a stocky race.

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Views)

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them will be strong, and mothers are glad to see them on their offspring. Perhaps they reason that if the baby spirit was able to stand the long journey necessary to come to the birth, it will endure the longer journey of this human existence.

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I have noticed a few cases of homosexuals among the Karen, though they do not seem to be as common as among the Burmese. These individuals, who assume more or less the dress and customs of the opposite sex, have been known to contract unions with others of the same sex and live as husband and wife. The cases I found have all been on the plains.

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KAREN BOYS

Most of the crowd that gathered to watch the foreigner have already fled. Only a few brave boys remain to face the camera

PLAYMATES—KAREN BOYS AND THE SONS OF THE AUTHOR

Notice the unusually curly hair of one of the Karen boys, all of whom are brothers, children of a Burmese mum and a Toungoo woman.

19: Marshall M-6 (ca. 1910) 1923 AFI Burma
Karen AFI

length, some plantain leaves, and a pole long enough to serve as a spit for the pig. He cuts one of the bamboo pieces into two sections in which to cook the rice and curry, and splits the other bamboo into withes. After the rice has been cooked, the mother mixes a little of it with chaff, puts some of it in a small pot and a lump of it on top of the pot, besides sprinkling water on the fireplace.

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A Shaw Karen Grandmother

Later the lump of chaff and rice is used as a bait in catching the pig that is to become the offering. Two withes of the outside and two of the inside of the bamboo are used in tying the feet of the animal, and one more of each kind to bind the feet together. Other withes are wound around the snout, one turn being passed through the mouth, which is thus closed securely. The pig is now carried into the house and laid on plantain leaves spread on the floor, a winnowing-tray being placed in front of it along with the